TRANSCRIPTION NOTE: This chapter of the Third Edition of *The History of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church* was transcribed 3/31/2025. Care has been taken to make the text as close in appearance and as identical in content to the physical source material as possible.

Chapter 1

OUR ORIGIN

To understand and appreciate the early settlers of Mecklenburg County, one must know something of their origin, history, and relation to other American colonists. Historically North Carolina is the oldest of the states; Sir Walter Raleigh founded a colony on Roanoke Island in 1584. The fate of this “Lost Colony” remains one of the greatest mysteries of our nation. The first permanent settlers of North Carolina came from England in 1665; they settled in the eastern part of the state. Next came immigrants from Scotland and Germany who chose other portions of the state for their homes. The highland Scotch established homes along the shores of the Cape Fear River. The Scotch from Ulster penetrated the central and western sections of the state. It is the latter group whose story most concerns us in Mecklenburg; it is our purpose to trace their path from Scotland to Steele Creek.

During the reign of James the First of England and Scotland, two Irish nobles rebelled against the king. The king took possession of their lands in an area of Northern Ireland known as Ulster. He wanted to settle this region of half a million acres with Protestants from Scotland in order to balance the Catholic population of the remainder of Ireland. The Scotch welcomed this opportunity for a new home and emigrated in great numbers. Within fifty

years 200,000 Scotchmen had made the change. The Scotch were thrifty, industrious, and prosperous. They were Presbyterians and gave pre-eminence to their religious beliefs. After moving to Ireland, they continued their occupation of sheep-raising. Soon they rivaled the British manufactures in the production of wool and woolen goods. Parliament passed first a law to restrict their woolen trade, and later, a law to prevent them from having their own schools and teachers. They were required to accept the Church of England as a replacement of the Presbyterian Church; this they refused. They sought instead some means of escape from the pressure. America was the answer. This group became known in America as Scotch Irish.

Beginning in the mid 1680's, the Scotch-Irish came by shiploads to America. Some came through the port of Charleston, South Carolina, but the main route of entry for this group was by way of the Delaware River to Philadelphia. Records in Philadelphia for the year 1684 show that in one week six shiploads arrived. By the late 1600's lands around Philadelphia had become thickly settled; therefore, many of the Scotch-Irish moved towards the western part of Pennsylvania. They soon found the Indians hostile and the climate cold, so they migrated again to the more temperate climate of Virginia or the Carolinas. The trail going south was known as "The Philadelphia Wagon Road". Eventually this road extended to the Carolinas. This opened for settlement the territory which now includes the counties of Rowan, Iredell and that part of Anson County that later became

Mecklenburg. Mecklenburg county was formed from Anson County in 1762. It was named in honor of the reigning House of Hanover, and the town of Charlotte was named in honor of Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg.

There were two other groups of Scotch ancestry among the early settlers of the Piedmont region oCarolina. The group known as “Scotch of Highlands” came from the highland region of northern Scotland. Most of them came by ship directly to the North Carolina coast, settling first among the Cape Frear River, but later moving westward to a cooler climate and a malaria free area. A third group of Scotch, mainly from the lowlands of Scotland, also fled religious persecution and came to America. This group entered mainly through the ports of Charleston, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina. Because of swamp fever (malaria) they sought higher elevations. There were no roads or trails, so they worked their way northward and westward using river transportation until they reached Mecklenburg. Eventually a wagon road was opened from Charleston; this became the main route of commerce for the central Carolina region. Many of those from the lowlands of Scotland settled in the Sugar Creek and Rocky River areas. From there some moved to Steele Creek, a few miles southwest.

Thus we see that nearly all the settlers of the Steely Creek area were of scotch descent. Common bonds forged by similarities in culture, language, and religion

unified the group. As strangers in a strange land, they chose to live in the same geographical setting.

North Carolina became a home not only for the Scotch, but also for Germans from the northern regions of Germany, principally from the Palatinate. These people had been mercilessly treated by Louis XVI because of their religious beliefs. As German Protestants, they had clung to Luther's translation of the Bible. The Germans settled mainly in the western part of North Carolina, but some lingered in the Piedmont region, particularly after cultivation of cotton or tobacco became popular. French Huguenots, who were victims of religious oppression also sought freedom. They came mainly from the mountains of France to the western part of this state. As in the case of several other states, the early settles of North Carolina sought a new environment because of religious or economic suppression. Records from Pennsylvania show that by 1715 a migratory trail had opened southward into the Shenandoah Valley affording settlers access to more land; this route was known as "The Wachovia Trail". This trail passed through the current site of Winston-Salem, an area settled initially by people identified as Moravians. A diary kept by the Moravians tells us that more than twelve hundred wagons passed through their settlement in 1752. As the settlers spread south of the Winston Salem area, a branch of the Wachovia Trail was extended to Charlotte, to Camden in South Carolina and on to Charleston.

There are no early records of yields of agricultural crops to use as an index of the quality of soil in the Steele Creek area during the early years. At least we can say that the area was covered by virgin forests. In the earliest edition of the church history, Douglas asks us to think of this whole section of the country as one unbroken, uncultivated forest which had long been the home and undisputed hunting grounds of the red men of the forest. There were no barren fields or red clay hills worn to gullies. The wolf and deer roamed at large.

Reverend Douglas' own vernacular depicts the situation best: "After landing in the New World many of these homeless exiles journeyed in their migrations, with staff in hand, with no finger-board to point their course, or chart to direct them to their future home, but the Providence of God, when these pilgrims and strangers had crossed this Jordan, guided them through the midst of this wild forest, till they lifted up their wondering eyes and said: 'Hitherto the lord had brought us, and here we will rest our Ebenezer'. All nature then made for them one capacious temple of God[1]"

Four-wheeled wagons drawn most of the time by a team of oxen served as the main means of transport for both people and goods. Roadways or, to be more exact, trails were established largely by clearing trees. Both for convenience and ease of preparation, wagon trails often followed near streams; therefore, they were frequently

[1] John Douglas, *The History of Steele Creek Church* (Charlotte: Observer Printing and Publishing House, 1901), p.9. All quotations from the Reverend Douglas found in this history come from subsequent pages of his first edition.

impassible in wet weather. Settlements were few and far between; distance and lack of means of transportation caused isolation. Frequently a wagon brought the migrant family to an area and served as a home until trees could be cut from forests to construct houses of logs.

A typical house in the early era consisted of one room with one window, a single doorway, dirt floor, and a fireplace used for cooking and as a source of heat. Shortages of cloth led to the use of skins of wild animals for clothing. Gunpowder and salt were among the dearest items of possession. On the whole, comforts were few, but the settlers accepted sacrifice in order to enjoy greater freedom, especially in the expression of religious beliefs.

The early settlers possessed few farm tools for land clearing, tillage, and harvest. Often scarcity of seeds was a handicap, too. Cattle was the most popular form of livestock in the early period. Europeans were accustomed to milk and butter, consequently possession of at least one cow was considered essential. Until well into the 1800’s oxen were the main source of power for agriculture and transportation. It was not until about 1825 that mules became popular for field work in central and western North Carolina. Horses were popular for riding and drawing buggies, but they were never used in large numbers for field work.

Historians agree that pigs and chickens were also kept by the early inhabitants of Mecklenburg. Pigs were brough in during the early 1700’s, mainly by the Scotch

settling in the eastern part of the state but were well distributed even in the mountains as early as 1770-1775.

Sheep raising and trades having to do with the preparation of yarn and clothing were popular in Scotland. A number of the early settlers attempted to bring over sheep, but sheep were not very good sea voyagers in the ships of the day, so losses were high. Those sheep which survived the sea voyage later succumbed in large numbers to internal parasites which were prevalent because of the warm, humid summer weather. As a result, sheep breeding never became popular in the Steele Creek area as originally planned. In fact, had England not encouraged the cultivation of cotton and tobacco, the early settlers would have experienced even more hardships in survival, especially after the fur trade declined from the excessive killing of animals and the destruction of habitat for wild animals resulting from land clearing.

High demands for cotton and tobacco abroad led to prosperity for the industrious Scotch. They used their increased income to improve housing and home comforts. One-room cabins were expanded or replaced by two-story houses with several rooms. Sawmills were brought into the settlements; lumber began to replace logs. Ships loaded with cotton and tobacco for England needed ballast on the return voyage. Bricks served this purpose and were used for building chimneys for the log and wooden structures, and for houses for those most prosperous. Improvement in the standard of living at an

early stage was no doubt a factor in getting churches built in the Mecklenburg area.

The title deeds granted by the crown to Colonists gave the occupation for those receiving land in Mecklenburg. There were weavers, tailors, merchants, teachers, blacksmiths, surveyors, and “Gentlemen”, a term used for denoting a certain rank rather than quality. When the tools and equipment brought by the settlers began to wear out, they proved self-sufficient in meeting many of their needs. Blacksmiths began to make tools. The hides that initially went to Charleston to be traded for leather were diverted to Richard Barry’s tannery in Hopewell for leather making. Moses Alexander set up a water course on Rocky River to grind wheat and corn. Thomas Polk provided both a sawmill and a grist mill in Charlotte. Although a description of a brewery or distillery does not appear among the early industries, historians remind us that some of the grains grown in the area were made into whiskey which was used freely by some. Later in the book it will be shown that the use of alcohol became a strong issue in Steele Creek Church.

Stenhouse’s history, *Exploring Old Mecklenburg*, describes how two sites were proposed for the city of Charlotte. Martin Phifer, a representative in the General Assembly from the Rocky River section, wanted the courthouse located in the Rocky River section, but Thomas Polk, also a representative in the General Assembly, favored the present site of the city. In 1755 Mr. Phifer introduced a bill to lay off a town in the Rocky River

area with square lots and streets and to erect a courthouse. Polk managed to get Phifer's bill defeated and replaced by his bill. Land agent McCullock saw advantages in Polk's bill in that it would be put the city on Selwyn land. The agent received approval from Lord Selwyn to grant 360 acres of land for building. Evidently the grant of land got approval for Polk's bill. Thomas Polk, Abraham Alexander, and John Frobock were commissioned to erect a building to hold court. In 1767 a building was dedicated. It stood at the present intersections of Trade and Tryon streets in Charlotte. It was a two-story building with an assembly room on the second floor. There were two sets of steps to the platform at the entrance of the room. The first floor was used for a market. The courthouse became a regular meeting place for county men to discuss the problems that disturbed the colonists.

The period 1755 to 1770 can be termed as the formative period of Mecklenburg County in religious affairs as well as others. The unsettled conditions between the crown and the Colonies, the boundary disputes, the hostility of Indians, and the fierce struggle for existence in a county with no roads, distant markets and little available money made accomplishments such as plans for cities and courthouses monumental.

By the late 1760s it was becoming apparent that ties between the Colonias and England were no longer mutually helpful. England had become oppressive with respect to taxation and laws limiting the rights and

freedom of the Colonists. When a request for relief was made, England sent troops to assure control. The men of Mecklenburg were aware of the seriousness of this action and moved to protect the county by subdividing it into districts, each with an organized militia. A group met in early April, 1775, at a spring on the farm of John McKnitt Alexander near Croft. The meeting was at night for security reasons because there were many in the area still loyal to the crown. At that meeting it was agreed to have a countywide convention in Charlotte on May 19, 1775. Two members of each militia district were to be representatives. Robert Irwin and Zaccheus Wilson, both elders from Steele Creek, represented the Steele Creek district. These two men were also signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

After the Revolutionary War, the transition of power to local authorities was made without serious problems. During this same period the people began to establish religious and educational institutions. Following the erection of homes, places of worship became their next concern,. With the strong Scotch influence Presbyterian churches were by far most numerous. When a church was built, it was usually accompanied by a school. Later, this church-school tie led to strong church support of colleges.

Before 1770 there were Presbyterians, Lutherans, German Calvinists, a few Baptists, and some extreme followers of Whitefield known as “New Lights” in Mecklenburg county. Presbyterians and Germans had established churches by that time. The churches of Steele

Creek, Hopewell, Centre, Sugar Creek, Rocky River, Poplar Tent, New Providence, the German churches west of the Catawba river, and the Clear Creek Church had all assumed a permanent place. By 1770 there were several preachers in the area who claimed equal authority with ministers of established churches, This created controversy, especially with respect to who could perform marriage ceremonies. Until January, 1771, when the Assembly enacted a law allowing Presbyterian minsters to solemnize the rites of marriage, only Justices of the Peace were permitted to perform this ceremony. Differences in viewpoints on the handling of marriage and other religious concepts, wars, epidemic diseases, an economic hardships due to fluctuations in the price of cotton were problems of continued concern in the Steele Creek community.

Until well into the twentieth century, Mecklenburg County was largely an agricultural society. A strong part of this society was the church. Because there were few other activities in rural areas, church attendance was important. Sunday was often a long day. For many years the farm families arose early on Sunday mornings. They milked their cows, prepared breakfast, and packed a lunch. They hitched a team to a farm wagon. Quilts were placed in the bottom of the wagon bed for the children and chairs for the adults. Frequently the families had to leave early in order to arrive at the church for the 10:00 A.M. service. At lunch they adjourned and spread their lunches on rocks that served as tables. After lunch, they returned to the church for another sermon lasting one

hour or more. This was followed by the journey home to repeat the chores of milking and feeding. By the time they reached home many families had travelled fifteen miles or more.

When we behold the humble beginnings of Steele Creek and contemplate the scenes of our present surroundings, our heartfelt appreciation goes to the stalwart men and women who settled in this part of North Carolina. They forged a great community with an unshakeable faith in God and Church.

The Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York Harbor has this inscription engraved on its base:

“. . . . Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

And the countries of the world have sent these masses to our door-the poor, the rich, the uneducated, the brilliant-into this melting pot of humanity. Furthermore, out of it has come a new type of man-the American, born free, with a will to live free, asking only for the right to live and a fighting chance, seeking equality and human justice for all, and displaying a tremendous driving force to create a new environment for mankind.

Two hundred years in time, five thousand miles in distance between Scotland to Steele Creek, but, but the grace of God, the stalwart men and women who settled in this part of our country made this come to pass. From a feeble beginning the early settlers from various parts of the Old World forged the connection of a powerful and great nation with an unshakeable faith in God and Church.